

# LINO MANNOCCI



**Wilhelm-Hack-Museum**

Stadt Ludwigshafen am Rhein

Berliner Straße 23, 6700 Ludwigshafen/Rh.

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CEDIS

Lino Mannocci was born in Viareggio, Tuscany in April 1945. He moved to London in 1968 and studied first at the Camberwell School of Art (1971-74) and then as a post-graduate at the Slade (1974-76), where he concentrated on printmaking. Since 1978 his painting has developed in two distinct, but increasingly complementary and mutually dependent modes.

The first is a series of oils on wood whose motif has usually been one of a frontal interior space recessing towards a wall which is occupied by a number of ornamental, decorative or more functional elements, the silent activity of which provides an enigmatic focus for the composition. These paintings are produced in a painstaking technique which combines strong outlines with differential stippling in muted colours across most of the surface area. Critical discussion of this work in Italy has been preoccupied both with technical description of Mannocci's style and method of paint application (his «micrometrica puntinatura») and, more often, with rhetorical and abstract explorations of the nature of his poetic interior spaces, (his «profondità abitata»).

The second mode, which is the subject of the present exhibition, originated slightly later, in about 1979, and involves the partial overpainting of picture postcards. The confined miniaturism of the postcard paintings, even in comparison to the oils on wood, which are themselves of modest scale (approx 40 cm x 40 cm), is, not without a hint of irony perhaps, the site of a new more improvised and gestural touch, promoting effects which modern painters have pursued most often by expanding and not by concentrating the arenas of their activity.

Mannocci's means of interference with the postcard can be described as follows: a dominant environment of paint of one colour, usually subdued, is applied as the basic technique of separating figures and objects from their previous contexts. This «coat» is visibly inflected, and streaked with one or more colours to achieve effects of highlight and contrast. Often two zones are created, working as sky and earth, wall and floor, or just as two differentiated fields. Within this new «ground» (though it is proud of the surface) a variety of

«dramatis personae» are stranded in poses of duty, attention and leisure. There is a surreal transposition to the new painted environment where the uneffaced protagonists are isolated against open pigmented spaces. The variety of finishes and degrees of opacity of the paint permit occasional flashes and sometimes extended passages of the original motif to be glimpsed under the flourish of brushstrokes. Contours around the «found» motifs are scrupulously delineated (or rather «discovered») to foreground the contrast between the photographic realism of the printed postcard and the painterly intrusions which now inhabit the surface.

As opposed to the essentially additive and cumulative techniques which characterize the «art of assemblage» (collage, montage, etc.), fragments, here, are conjured from coherent mass-marketed images, the «found material», rather through a process of subtraction, in which field and image relationships are ironically inverted.

Ernst-like felicities of placement, contrast and pictorial resolution are often displayed as in one example where a modern bather gestures in confinement behind a high 'hedge' of differentially worked pigment, a mock-grattaged barrier between her and the shifting water's edge.

The most recent of Mannocci's postcard paintings, produced in the autumn and winter of 1983/84, are progressively more free in their brushwork and more unrestricted in their range of chromatic contrasts. Certain colours now on the palette set up intriguing counterpoints with the raw primaries of the tourist postcard, often artificially heightened itself, on which they lie. There is more daring, more cunning and more complexity of suggestion.

The art of overpainting, obscuring and effacing has become a self-reflexive modernist trope par excellence. A formalist 'history' might claim its evolutionary origins in say Cézanne's portrait of Victor Choquet with its rhetoric of surface densities, and move forward, through Cubism and Surrealism, from which movements works could be pressed easily enough into service, to create an 'art of overlap' in say Pollock and Rothko, and luxuriate on

the paint interface in Morris Louis; further, if it were eclectic enough, room might be found for the observation that in more recent 'expressive' painting there is often an inner syntax rising through the under layers, from Baselitz and Guston (mid and late) to the more esoteric distortions and black-outs of Art and Language. Paint on paint about paint is an island on a far reach for the 'bateau moderniste'.

Mannocci, however, would not seem to ply this route to its end for a number of reasons; first the diminutive scale, the wit and the improbability of his postcard works appear more a reaction to the seriousness of the paint on painters, who often manifest one but almost never all three of such characteristics. Secondly, the central opposition between paint and the photographic image has, interestingly, not been a central focus of the modern movement; and when it has surfaced in say Rauschenberg or in certain photographic tinters and dyers, one material has usually been subordinate to, or suffocated by, the other; as Lawrence Alloway has pointed out, Rauschenberg insisted that he was «fundamentally a painter», and work in colour additions to (often) black and white photographs has mainly solicited fashionable effects from gratuitous infilling.

Mannocci's rediscovery of the painted postcard mode was encouraged by a number of diverse stimulations. Max Ernst made limited use of what appears to be a similiar, though not identical, technique during his period of extended experimentation with materials in the 1920's. Of more importance, however, are the artist's own reflections on the signifying capacity of the postcard; its unique recto - verso combination of image and text; its compressed agency in the transmission of personal information from a non-local world to a world of familiarity and domesticity, of more easily consumable signs; its suitability for modification, adaptation, coverage.

Interestingly, two French writers, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have treated issues similar to these. While the postcard per se was not isolated in Barthes' 'Mythologies' (1957), his analysis of representations and pre-

dispositions of the travel experience in the chapter on 'The Blue Guide', raised relevant questions about the construction of notions of place bounded by the constraints of a value system saturated with a Fine Art ideology.

Derrida's 'La Carte Postale - de Socrate à Freud et au-delà' (1980) is a typically recondite assemblage of fragments, often typographically discontinuous, departing from the pre-text of the postcard. While Derrida's interests are more abstruse and philosophic — he writes of his «apocalypse» and his «ontologie de carte postale» — the original stimulus to discuss issues arising from the postcard, like Mannocci's painting of issues onto them, came from experiences as a foreigner in England. For Derrida it was the sight of a frontispiece by Matthew Paris (13th century) to a fortune telling book in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, which was reproduced as a postcard; for Mannocci, not so much a foreigner as an emigré, it was repeated confrontations with postcard images of tourist spots in London and elsewhere.

Mannocci uses these views of London, of beaches in his native Viareggio, and in the South of England or of interiors from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence to decompose the celebrated typographies of which he has been a necessary witness, if only in the act of collecting their vulgar representations. The contemporary tourist postcard is a polychrome signifier of leisure, pleasure and the new scenic 'other'. It is marketed for consumption at a glance by the selection of a plenary viewpoint, which encapsulates the scene, becomes the scene as the image travels. Its elements cohere as spectacle through their supplement to the imputed deficiencies of 'natural' place - concealed atopic distortions managed by a wide angle lens, tinting or aerial perspective. Mannocci's further supplement of paint and brushstroke de-registers the landmark into non-place, creating weird environments of pigment and photograph which can only signify through their mutual differences and which constitute the painter's visual interruption of the recto — verso, word — image combination in the postcard, hitherto vaunted as its most salient spatial axis.

**John Welchman**

1984